Satire: Humor, on the Offense

Humor provides a quick way to an audience’s heart, especially when attempting to identify and discuss delicate social issues. If successfully executed, humor can lower the guard of even the most stubborn reader, and open his or her mind to the arguments that follow. Johnathan Swift and William Hogarth were keen on this strategy, and the marriage of wit and humor is what allowed their works to succeed and gain traction amongst an overwhelming number of publications, both visual and literary, that emerged from their time period. Both artists excelled at their respective crafts, and seized the opportunity to further personal paradigms about social affairs through them. However, in doing so, they also chose to evolve these artistic forms by adapting them to their own society. By representing the chaos of city life in a humorous fashion, Swift and Hogarth undermine the serious attitude that London possessed, and mock the society that held itself in such high esteem.

Though London could have been considered a sparkling gem of civilization during their occupation, the city itself was a generally disgusting place. This could be said about both the literal cleanliness of the city streets and the numerous vices that pervaded the many tiers of this elegant society. The streets could, at any time, possess any amount of trash, mud, sewage, and sometimes even a bonfire or two, as depicted in “Night”. Swift and Hogarth create a stark contrast by caricaturizing the inadequacy of sanitation systems, and moral ambiguities they represent, against the great pride and reputation the city possessed. Using the Neoclassical art form as a foil, these men compare the bustling, dirty, and modern city to the beautiful, calm, and dainty forms of artistic expression that depicted pastoral regions. This adds yet another dimension to the relationships that are being exaggerated via satire, and would have required an extensive intellectual awareness to successfully play upon. Hogarth’s prints depict the city at different times of day, likening it to the organic changing of the seasons, and providing the artificial counterparts to a sunrise, sunset, or a starlit sky. Swift also makes a clear allusion to the biblical flood that was sent to wash away the sins of man, suggesting London has become so “dirty” that only divine intervention can hope to redeem it. As the muck and the mire of the city’s gutters bubbles to the surface, the trash “seems to tell / what street they sailed from, by their sight and smell”, binding filthiness to the individual identities of the city subjects.

Satire is an underhanded form of commentary, and is relayed through tone, word choice, and paradigm instead of a direct assault upon the subject matter. Hogarth’s prints and paintings utilize visual elements inherent to the form, such as spatial arrangement and color contrast, to relay his perspective of city life. He achieves a similar effect through the visual content, such as the crestfallen facial expressions or ludicrous differences in attire. These details are intentionally manipulated in order to evoke a specific reaction from the audience. Watching a child crying over spilled pie might initially cause pity or sadness, which would then turn to disgust after realizing that a rogue ruffian still elects to devour it from the dirty city street. Another example is the implicit tension between the French and Englishmen in “Noon”, who are divided by an invisible line that bisects the print. These differences are further exaggerated by their clothing; the French boast bright, lively, exotic attire while the Englishwoman is indifferent, her breasts popping out of her common dress as she is fondled by a man with whom she may have no relation. While Hogarth presents these differences visually, “Description of a City Shower” relies upon sounds and semantics in order to relay its humor. The work is composed in iambic pentameter, and consists almost entirely of heroic couplets, framing common garbage as an epic and noble subject. Eloquent language is associated with harsh truths – even the titular “shower” is an extreme understatement, and is supposed to make the audience think of a calm afternoon storm rolling in over the countryside. Swift also conveys the tremendous energy and commotion of the city through his diction, especially when the rain begins to fall, and the continual presence of plosive sounds mimics the incessant plodding of the rain. The heroic couplets and iambic pentameter also suppose a rhythmic structure, and mirror the mesmerizing effects of rainfall, swishing back and forth like the inevitable flood that builds momentum and eventually surges through the city. In this way, Swift and Hogarth make fun of the excessive languorousness that pervades the pastoral form, and provide their vulgar, ugly counterparts that exist in a modern city.

When examined in conjunction, these works approach the same problem from different sides, investigating the hypocritical nature of London and the façade of harmony that enshrouds it. Swift exaggerates this problem to the maximum, while Hogarth’s style is more subtle in its comparisons. The inhabitants of London are happy to ignore the undesirable qualities of their society and themselves, much like the cowering citizens of Swift’s poem; only a catastrophic storm can temporarily bring together those who are normally divided along the lines of party, class, and nationality. Like the “oiled umbrella’s sides” that repels the rain, or the simple act of throwing garbage and sewage into the streets, Londoners are content with a very temporary solution – anything to resolve the immediate problem, with no effort given to address the greater issues at large. The literal dirtiness that accrues as a result is representative of an inner dirtiness, as is the inability for London to permanently ignore these problems that will inevitably gush forth with the right form of societal pressure. Hogarth also examines the contrasting mores of social classes, though not necessarily in a mocking tone - unlike the shivering, rain soaked, crowds of Swift's poem, these characters are free to live out the stereotypical behaviors that would have been common to their social standing, and require no extreme event of nature to display their undesirable behaviors. For example in “Morning”, a well-to-do lady ignores the cavalier drunkards, who continue to drink into the morning while she heads to church. However, her holiness is called into question as her attendant shuffles behind her, hand stuffed into his pockets and his nose agitated by the cold. This is similar to Hogarth’s series on “Industry and Idleness”, in which the immediate depiction of the work is contrasted by the biblical verses that adorn the prints. Meanwhile, Swift’s “Triumphant Tories and desponding Whigs” who “forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs” specifically chastise the intellectual circles of society, who are similarly prone to the filth and disgust the storm has wrought, despite their elevated social positions.

These artists investigates similar issues of moral principle, and utilize satire in the process, but each of them does so in unique manner. Swift creates the monstrosity of a “shower” to criticize the madness incited by the rainstorm, the social differences that exist between classes, and society’s complete inadequacy to handle either of these events. Hogarth’s perspective is more incidental, revealing these differences gently through familiar depictions of daily life. His humor is not as immediately apparent as Swift’s, and requires an attentive eye to detect successfully. As each of these men wield humor as a weapon, they hope to offend their subjects through mockery, and use this stimulated reaction to provoke reflection, contemplation, and general social awareness.

Word Count: 1257